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ABSTRACT

The report describes a study of a multilingual group of six adult literacy students, five women and one man, enrolled in an English literacy class at an Australian college. Subjects' countries of origin include Afghanistan, Indonesia/China, Lebanon, Iran, and China. The study examined factors affecting subjects' daily literacy practices and language choices. Students' statements are presented and summarized on these topics: personal linguistic background; language choices and code-switching; literacies and competence levels; use of family and social support networks; effects of literacy on dependency and the exercise of social power; problems involving children and language shift; and the perceived value ascribed to specific English literacy practices in both personal and family contexts. Results showed extensive previous language learning exposure and a number of variables influencing code-switching behavior in reading and writing. Variation was also found in literacy levels, depending largely on education and motivation to attain literacy. All subjects needed social support networks in their literacy practices, although the networks vary. For three students, dependency patterns in the home due to lack of literacy were a significant issue. In some cases, intergenerational family language issues emerged. Pedagogical implications are discussed. Contains 61 references. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Literacy Practices and Linguistic Choices

A sociocultural study of a multilingual adult literacy student group

Stephen Black and Kay Thorp

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Literacy Practices and Linguistic Choices

A sociocultural study of a multilingual adult literacy student group

Stephen Black and Kay Thorp

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Introduction

This is a small scale research study of an adult literacy student group in a TAFE College. The study was undertaken by two TAFE adult literacy teachers, one of whom was the teacher of the student group which is the focus of this study.

The study was undertaken due to a number of factors. First, despite some quite extensive research over the past decade in the adult literacy field in Australia, surprisingly little research has focused on the adult literacy students themselves. Few studies have looked at who adult literacy students are, why they are participating in an adult literacy program, and how they use literacy in their everyday lives.

Second, few studies have focused on the multilingual composition of many adult literacy classes. This is of particular interest to the teachers/researchers of this current study given that in their TAFE college in the metropolitan west of Sydney, nearly all adult literacy students speak languages other than English in their home domain. The recognition and the implications of teaching a multilingual student population are often not acknowledged sufficiently in the research and literature on adult literacy programs (cf Davison et al 1994). For many people it seems to be assumed that 'adult literacy' programs are for native English speaking students, and that those students who speak languages other than English require ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) provision (See Hammond et al 1992). During the formative years of adult literacy provision in TAFE in the late seventies and early eighties this dichotomy may have been appropriate, but not now, at least not in many TAFE colleges which serve multilingual community catchment areas such as those within the Sydney metropolitan region. In fact it is rare for an adult literacy class not to include students who speak languages other than English (Davison et al 1994; Hammond et al 1992).

A third factor influencing this study has been recent research developments that fall within what some researchers have termed the 'New Literacy Studies' (Gee, 1990; Street, 1993). These developments (briefly explained below) provide alternative ways of conceptualising literacy, seeing literacy, or more accurately, literacies, related to social practice. To date there is little evidence that this alternative paradigm has been applied to the adult literacy program context. We know little about the multiple literacies that might be operating within multilingual adult literacy student groups or the literacy practices of these students in their everyday lives and how these practices relate to their linguistic diversity. There is little exploration, for example, of the value these adult literacy students ascribe to their 'other' (than English) literacies relative to dominant English literacies. In their everyday life domain, when do they choose to use the dominant English literacies and when do they choose to use their 'other' (marginalised) literacies, and why? And what implications might this have for teaching an adult literacy class? These are the sorts of issues we begin to explore in this study.

A research framework: The 'New Literacy Studies'

The 'New Literacy Studies' have challenged traditional understandings of literacy. Traditionally, literacy, based on the psychological paradigm that has dominated education for much of this century, has been seen as a neutral package of decontextualised skills that people possess in varying degrees. Street (1985, 1993) in a significant critique of this conceptualisation refers to it as the 'autonomous' model of literacy, seeing literacy:

> ... in technical terms, treating it as independent of social context, an autonomous variable whose consequences for society and cognition can be derived from its intrinsic character (Street, 1993:5).

In contrast to this conceptualisation, more recent studies, largely from sociolinguistic and anthropological perspectives, stress the 'social' aspects of literacy (eg Baker & Luke, 1991; Barton, 1994; Baynham, 1995; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Gee, 1990; Levine, 1986; Street, 1985, 1995). Cook-Gumperz (1986:1), for example, in her seminal study, states in her introduction:

> Literacy is not just the simple ability to read and write: but by possessing and performing these skills we exercise socially approved and approvable talents; in other words, literacy is a socially constructed phenomenon.

Many of these 'New Literacy Studies' are based on ethnographic research which has looked at what literacy means to people and how it is used in many local communities and contexts (eg Barton & Ivanic, 1991; Hamilton, Barton & Ivanic, 1994; Heath, 1983, 1986; Street, 1993; Szwed, 1981). It has been demonstrated that the value and uses of literacy vary greatly across and within communities, and in fact it often becomes inappropriate to refer to literacy in the singular; instead many researchers now refer to *literacies*. In some multilingual communities, for example, people might be required to use multiple literacies even within the same family, as Saxena (1994) demonstrated with an in-depth study of one Panjabi family in the UK in which family members variously switched between English, Panjabi, Urdu and Hindi with their correspondingly different scripts, depending on the situational context of each family member.

In looking at how literacies are used and what they mean to people in specific situations or contexts, researchers have focused on 'literacy events', the particular activities in which literacy has a role, such as reading a bedtime story to a child, and 'literacy practices', the general cultural ways of utilising literacy that people draw upon in a literacy event (Barton, 1991:3-5; 1994:36-37).

Baynham (1995:53) elaborates on the concept of literacy practices, explaining that it is not just what people do with literacy, 'but also what they make of what they do, how they construct its value, the ideologies that surround it'. Baynham refers to a study by Barton and Padmore (1991) of everyday writing in a local community in the north of England. Their in-depth interviews with community members reveal a complex picture of what people write, their roles (eg as spouses, parents, relatives, workers, neighbours, friends), the support networks they employ, and their differential values and attitudes in relation to

specific literacy practices. It was found that people can have wide-ranging and in some cases quite opposing views in relation to a particular literacy event. They cite, for example, one interviewee who kept a diary to cope with difficult changes in his life (due to illness, unemployment, separation), and yet another interviewee was unable to write anything precisely because she was going through a difficult time in her life (Barton and Padmore, 1991:73-74).

Social networks are particularly significant as ethnographies of literacy reveal that literacy practices do not necessarily involve 'individual' acts. In some communities, for example, it is common to share literacy events such as reading the newspaper (Heath, 1983). In other communities social networks may involve an informal and reciprocal exchange of services for assistance with literacy (Fingeret, 1983) or literacy is embedded in the 'funds of knowledge' exchanged within poorer, marginalised communities (Moll, 1992). Literacy practices can also involve collaborative activities (Shuman, 1993) or the use of community interpreters as mediators of literacy (Baynham, 1993). All of these cross-cultural studies serve to reinforce the view that literacy practices are situated in broader social relations (Barton, 1994:41).

One of Baynham's (1995:1) basic premises in his publication on literacy practices, states: 'literacy is ideological: like all uses of language it is not neutral, but shapes and is shaped by deeply held ideological positions, which can be either implicit or explicit'. He states further that, 'literacy needs to be understood in terms of social power'. These two aspects of literacy, ideology and social power, provide essential arguments promoted over the past decade by Street (1985, 1993) with his 'ideological model' of literacy which subsumed the 'autonomous model' outlined at the beginning of this section:

> A number of researchers in the new literacy studies have also paid greater attention to the role of literacy practices in reproducing or challenging structures of power and domination. Their recognition of the ideological character of the processes of acquisition and of the meanings and uses of different literacies led me to characterise this approach as an 'ideological' model (Street, 1993:7).

Street focuses attention on the dominance of particular literacies. He chooses to refer to the term 'dominant' literacies and its corollary, 'marginalised' literacies, following work by Grillo (1989) on dominant languages. In doing so, Street indicates questions and struggles over power which are not necessarily featured in discussions of multiple literacies as these often tend to focus just on different cultures:

> If you talk about dominant language, you're asking the questions, how did it become dominant? how does it reproduce itself? how does it contest with other, marginalised languages? (Street, 1995:135)

Street and Street (1991), for example, have sought to explain how literacy associated with schooling has achieved dominance over other literacies. They refer to the process of 'pedagogization' through which various aspects of schooling are seen to construct the 'autonomous' model of literacy outlined at the beginning of this section (ie literacy as 'a separate, reified set of 'neutral' competences, autonomous of social context' (Street & Street, 1991:150).

Recent work by linguists such as Fairclough (1989, 1995), Gee (1990, 1991), Kress (1985) and Lemke (1995) indicates that, for literacy or literacies to be understood, they need to be seen within the broader concept of 'Discourses', which are also inherently ideological and related to social power. For Gee, a Discourse (which he distinguishes with a capital D) 'is a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group ...' (Gee, 1990:143). According to Gee (1990, 1991), there are 'primary' Discourses, which are acquired early in life largely through family and peer group, and there are 'secondary' Discourses which are acquired through secondary institutions (such as schools and work places). Difficulties arise, however, for individuals or groups, if there is a disjunction between the primary and secondary Discourses, and especially if the secondary Discourses are the 'dominant' Discourses which are seen to be related to the acquisition of social goods and social power. Thus, within the argument presented by Street and Street (1991) above, the 'autonomous' model of literacy, which for them largely represents the 'schooled' literacy of the secondary (dominant) Discourse, might be at odds with the (marginalised) literacies found in a variety of primary Discourses. It has been argued that these disjunctions often present barriers to marginalised groups in accessing and benefiting from literacy programs. Such an argument has been promoted to help explain the relatively poor participation rates and achievement of African-Americans, Mexican-Americans and other 'involuntary minorities' in adult literacy programs in the United States (Martin, 1990).

In relation to the multilingual contexts of this current research, Baynham (1988), writing largely from a UK perspective, warns against research which falls into the dominant 'one culture/one language/one literacy' model which he sees as both unrealistic and racist. In culturally and linguistically diverse communities individuals may be bi- or multiliterate. Baynham (1988:62) indicates the need to demonstrate the richness and variety of literacies and in doing so counteract 'deficit model thinking' in education:

> The individual who struggles with reading and writing in English in a literacy group may be the same individual who teaches Qur'anic school, or organises Saturday schooling for the children in his/her community.

In recent years there is evidence of greater recognition through research of the different literacies used within multilingual communities in the UK and elsewhere (eg Hamilton, Barton & Ivanic, 1994; Heath, 1983; ILEA Afro-Caribbean Languages and Literacy Project in Further and Adult Education, 1990; London Language & Literacy Unit, 1995; Street, 1993), though in Australia there appears to be very little of this research (Cruickshank, 1995).

There is a body of significant Australian research in a related but broader 'national context', for example, on policy and equity issues involving minority languages and the dominant culture in Australia (Kalantzis, Cope & Slade, 1989), and on the extent of the maintenance of or shifts in community languages in Australia (Clyne, 1991). More recently there has been a focus on developing 'a pedagogy of multiliteracies' as a postmodernist response to the conceptualisation of cultural 'difference' and the rapidly shifting communication/technological

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literacies of 'fast capitalism' (New London Group, 1995; Knobel & Lankshear, 1995; Luke, 1995). There are also powerful statements on issues of cultural identity and marginalisation, highlighting the silencing of difference as it is embedded in the construction of the 'Other' in colonised people (Singh, 1994, 1995). But there is little of the localised ethnographic-type research focusing on literacy practices in the domain of everyday life (cf Barton & Padmore, 1991; Saxena, 1994), and the research that has been undertaken relates to literacy practices primarily involving school children not adults (eg Breen et al, 1994; Freebody et al, 1995).

Researching an adult literacy student group

Although this is a limited study, only an initial exploration, we examine a number of key issues involving a small group of multilingual adult literacy students. In particular, we ask:

> In their everyday literacy practices, which languages do they choose to use, and when and why?
>
> What value do they place on these different literacy practices and why are they differently valued?
>
> What social networks of support do they use in these literacy practices?

The research is driven largely by our concern to improve adult literacy pedagogy for multilingual students, but the research does not focus on pedagogy as such. As indicated above, the main focus is the literacy practices of the students in their home and everyday life domain. In rationale and methodology we are particularly influenced by Klassen's (1991) Canadian study of the everyday literacy practices of 'low-education Latin American newcomers' and also Barton (1991:6) who states: '... One reason for identifying the everyday as a distinct domain is the belief that the key to learning is in everyday activities and how people make sense of them ...'

If little is known of the literacy practices of these students in this domain (and others), how can literacy programs effectively meet their everyday needs? It seems the most basic of questions to ask, but one that appears rarely researched in a serious way in adult literacy programs.

The subjects of this current research are a small group of six students in one adult literacy class in a TAFE college in the metropolitan west of Sydney. The college student catchment area includes a wide range of culturally and linguistically diverse community groups, but while they vary greatly there appears to be a predominance of both Arabic and Chinese dialect speakers, and this is reflected in the composition of adult literacy classes generally at the college and this research group in particular.

The students in this research are all enrolled in a basic education subject known as Reading and Writing for Adults (RAWFA), and the students meet twice a week for three hours each time. All of the students are enrolled in this subject because they are longer term residents in Australia who have sufficient oral skills in English for small group literacy work and who have expressed the wish specifically to extend their literacy skills in English.

RAWFA classes comprise groups of six students and are based on individual student needs/goals and small group work, as the current syllabus indicates:

> Reading and Writing for Adults is a literacy subject designed to cater for students' individual needs, rates of learning, interests and learning styles. In consultation with the teacher, the students formulate their own goals and their reading and writing programs. The programs vary from student to student, encompassing both group and individual work (NSW TAFE 1996).

This brief syllabus description is indicative of a liberal humanistic/progressive teaching philosophy that has dominated adult literacy for many years, a philosophy in which determining the needs and goals of individual students is of paramount importance (see Lee & Wickert, 1994 for an analysis of the discourses of adult literacy teaching).

Research method

The purpose of the research was explained to each of the students in the literacy class and they agreed to be interviewed jointly by the two researchers at the college. The interviews were semi-structured, tape recorded and lasted up to an hour.

All of the students were relatively relaxed at being interviewed as one of the interviewers was their class teacher who had known them for the best part of a year (and more for some students). It is unlikely that an 'outside' interviewer could have gained the trust from the students that we as interviewers/teachers had. Thus some quite deep insights into the students' lives were already known and could be elaborated on and in some cases confirmed or challenged in the interviews.

Most of the students appeared to enjoy the opportunity of explaining their linguistic backgrounds and the literacy practices they engaged in. For at least one student the interview had special significance. Nawal returned to her class after the interview saying she had never before admitted to the absence of education in her first language and felt better for doing so.

The interview questions broadly focused on what students read and wrote at home and in their everyday life, and in which languages. We did not base questions on an extensive 'inventory' of likely literacy events in the everyday/home domain, but we did provide prompts at times (such as, 'Do you write letters to your family/friends?'). Students were also asked about their networks of support; who helped them at times, and in what circumstances and in which languages. Each interview took a different direction as we attempted to

follow up issues in more depth. Our aim was not to provide direct comparisons between students but to provide insights within the framework of the key questions outlined earlier (on page 5).

All the interviews were transcribed in full for later analysis and interpretation. In the findings that follow, the names and some of the personal details of the students have been changed to ensure their anonymity.

The students

The six students in the class were as follows:

Youssef is a refugee from Afghanistan in his late thirties who has been living in Australia for eight years. He has had some tertiary education but has been working in a factory since his arrival. He had not taken English language classes before coming to TAFE, learning English 'on the job'. He came to TAFE to upgrade his literacy skills as an insurance against the time he will not be able to withstand the physical demands of his current work.

Mei Ping is in her late fifties. Born in Indonesia of Chinese parentage she went to University in China. She has been in Australia for nine years after migrating from Hong Kong. She had not attended English language classes before coming to TAFE. A major goal for her was to be able to write stories in English for her grandchildren and to assist her husband with documentation in his work.

Maria now a widow in her late fifties came to Australia over thirty years ago from Lebanon as a young married woman. She had never taken English language classes before coming to TAFE. Her stated aim was to improve her reading and writing in order to take on tasks previously done by her husband.

Nawal is in her forties and came to Australia from Lebanon after her marriage. Like the other students, TAFE literacy classes were for her the first formal attempt to build her skills in English. Her hope was to gain sufficient command of written English to make her both employable and socially independent.

Mariam is in her thirties and Iranian born. She has been in Australia for seven years and unlike the rest of the group she attended language classes at the Adult Migrant English Service and also studied two years of ESOL at TAFE. Her aim was to look for a job when her younger child completed school.

Lily is in her forties. Born in China she went to live in Hong Kong as a child and then came to Australia to marry. She had some formal instruction in English language at a community college and was also given assistance by a volunteer tutor. Her main aim was to improve her reading and speaking in English rather than her writing in English.

Linguistic diversity

It became apparent early in the interviews that we were researching some very linguistically diverse students. Two monolingual researchers were confronted with the multilingual and bilingual realities of a small group of students who were in many ways a quite typical literacy class. Other literacy classes within the same college would probably have yielded similar findings.

Mei Ping was found to have the most extensive repertoire of languages as a review of her life trajectory reveals. In her early childhood in Indonesia her home language was Chao zhou, a Chinese dialect, but 'in the marketplace' she spoke Hokkien (Fujian), a language close to Chao zhou. Additionally, she learnt some Indonesian and also Mandarin because she was educated in a Chinese school. At high school she learnt some English. In the early 1950s she went to China where her linguistic repertoire was extended further as the following exploratory interview extract indicates:

S: Steve, interviewer
K: Kay, interviewer
MP: Mei Ping, interviewee

S: ... in 1953 you went to China that was Shanghai wasn't it?

MP: Nanking ... and then I learnt Russia, Russian language, because at that time Russia with Chinese was very friendly ... every student all are need to learn Russian

K: That was in the high school was it?

MP: In high school and university, so for five years, and at that time my Russian is not bad I can write ... we can write, but when we finished university we never used the Russia again, so we forgot it

S: And when you lived in Nanking you still spoke Hokkien?

MP: No, no, Mandarin ... because my family did not go to Nanking, they stayed in Indonesia

S: So only you went to China?

MP: Yeah, yeah and my brother

S: So when you went to Nanking you spoke Mandarin then ... so when did you start to learn Shanghainese?

MP: When I married my husband

S: Right and when was that?

MP: In the middle of 1964, we have a baby and learnt the language with my baby in Shanghai ...

S: So when you were bringing up your children, what language did your children learn?

MP: Shanghainese ... so I learn from baby first the words and then the sentence

K: So you learnt it as the baby learnt it

S: ... One we've forgotten and that's Cantonese, when did you learn Cantonese?

MP: About 1975 I went to Hong Kong

S: ... with your husband you left China and went to Hong Kong did you?

MP: Yes, yeah

K: And so you still spoke Shanghainese at home but you had Cantonese for Hong Kong and you were reading Mandarin and did you ever use Hokkien again?

MP: Yeah, sometimes I met my friend in Hong Kong, my secondary school friend now a lot in Hong Kong

S: And with your family you left behind in Indonesia you always speak Hokkien to them

MP: Very close to Hokkien but not Hokkien, Chao zhou, you know, very close to Hokkien, next to the Hokkien

Mei Ping has thus learnt to use a total of seven languages/dialects: Chau zhou, Hokkien, Mandarin, English, Russian, Shanghainese and Cantonese, though this repertoire involves only three different written scripts, and one of these, Russian, she has not used since the 1950s.

Of the other members of the literacy class, in addition to English, Youssef speaks Farsi (Persian) and Pashto; Mariam speaks Farsi and reads a little Arabic; Lily speaks Cantonese and a little Mandarin, and both Nawal and Maria speak Lebanese.

Literacy practices and linguistic choices

We consider here some of the everyday literacy practices of the student group and the languages they choose to use for these practices. In particular, we look at the 'switch' from one language to another. We see it related to the sociolinguistic term 'code switching' which usually refers to the conversational shift from one language to another which is common within multilingual communities (eg Baynham, 1993; Wardhaugh, 1992). Sociolinguists sometimes refer to the term 'situational code switching' to indicate that language shifts occur as the local situation demands (Wardhaugh, 1992:106). It fits in well with literacy being understood in context as situated social practice (eg Baynham, 1995) which has underpinned much of the discussion about literacy in this research study.

Youssef provides some good examples of such 'code switching' in his everyday literacy practices. At school in Afghanistan Youssef learnt to write in both Farsi and Pashto (the local language). In the following rather extended interview extract, we ask Youssef about his spoken language at home, the languages in which he writes notes and letters, and how these language switches relate to particular situations, including the linguistic preferences of his respondents:

S: When you're at home what language do you speak Youssef?

Y: Oh, Pashto, because my wife she is also Pashto, we just talk in Pashto

S: What about when you're writing, if you were writing a letter home?

Y: Oh I would use Persian (Farsi) because I learn Persian, but I am better in Persian than in Pashto

K: For writing you're better in Persian?

Y: Yes, because I have been educated in Persian, so my Persian is better than Pashto

K: So if you had to write a note to your wife what language would you use?

Y: Some of them they don't understand Persian, if they don't understand Persian I would write in Pashto

S: So what about your wife?

Y: She does not understand Persian because when the war happened there people left the school ... and there was no school there for 17 years

S: So she didn't learn?

Y: She also has not much education. She left when she was in 2nd or 3rd grade that's why she is ...

K: So that makes it harder for her here

S: If you had to leave a little message for her to say you were coming home late or you were going to college what would you write that in?

Y: In Pashto

S: And she would understand?

Y: Yes, yes

K: And what about the children?

Y: The children speak also Pashto

K: And do they read Pashto?

Y: They are very young three and a half and six

K: And are you going to teach them ... your language?

Y: Yes, I will teach them but their language must be English because they are born in here and they will learn English, their first language will be English, I do not know how they will (inaudible) in Pashto but their English must be good ...

S: Have you got family or friends in Afghanistan?

Y: All my family they're in Afghanistan, yes

S: Well what do you write to them in?

Y: Oh in Persian, my father, my brother, my father, they understand Persian, they studied Persian too, sometimes I miss some words in Pashto in grammar it is a very, very difficult language, Persian is easier, very easier language

S: Pashto is still alive?

Y: Yes, yes a very strong language the people who are living borders of Pakistan and Afghanistan they are also speaking Pashto

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S: But you don't write it very much do you?

Y: No, no

K: When you write home to Afghanistan what language do you use on the envelope?

Y: Now there is no communication with Afghanistan from Australia, completely they stopped two years ago and there is no telephone communication too ... I write in English to Pakistan and later on some people carry from Pakistan to Afghanistan, people use the telephone from here (inaudible) not directly from here and a few years before my parents was in Pakistan ... but we were writing in English on the envelope to Pakistan because they use English in Pakistan

Later in the interview we prompted Youssef further on his uses of Pashto in his writing:

S: When do you write in Pashto then, do you write in it at all?

Y: No, I told you I've got some friends there to send the letter in Pashto if they don't understand Persian, that's what I told you, there are some of them they don't understand Persian since 17 years they have had war there

S: These are friends in Afghanistan?

Y: Yes, yes and in Pakistan some people they are living Pakistan they don't understand Persian I send the letter in Pashto

S: So, some of the letters, most of the letters are in Persian, but in Pashto for those people who weren't educated? Is that the only time you write in Pashto, do you write anything else at all at home?

Y: Not much

As we can see there are a number of variables operating in Youssef's language choices. If he writes to his wife it is in Pashto (though in fact she may have very poor literacy skills in Pashto), and with his family members in Afghanistan, he writes in Persian, but for those who are not educated in Persian (more common since the war in Afghanistan), he writes in Pashto. But the political situation in Afghanistan is such that he must use English to address his mail due to the need to direct his mail via Pakistan. With his children it is clear he is interested in them developing English as their primary language.

We touched on other aspects of Youssef's everyday literacy practices. We found that reading materials in his home are almost exclusively in English:

S: How old are your children, are you starting to read them stories?

Y: Just some children's books and still they are just looking to the picture

S: And they're in English ... Do you have any books in Persian for them?

Y: No, I didn't bring any from my country

S: Have you got any books at home in Persian?

Y: Yes, I got one or two books in Persian and one book in Pashto, some religious things in Pashto ... I got Koran

S: So, that's the only books you've got ...?

Y: Yes, yes, nothing much, most of the books we left in our country

S: So it's because you can't get hold of those books here, you don't buy them?

Y: We don't have much of those books in here ... we got some Persian books in Iran shops, but I have not much time to read

Interestingly, also, we asked Youssef about the writing he might do in the home, and in particular, literacy events such as writing cards for birthdays, weddings etc. He indicated that in his community it was common to get someone else to write cards which were then printed and distributed:

S: Do you ever write poems or stories for yourself, sometimes people write diaries about what happened during the day, do you ever write like that?

Y: No, no

S: Things like birthday cards, do you give people those?

Y: Yes, yes, we do this, we give wedding cards and that sort of thing but we ... sometimes people have very, very good writing and we give one card to them and then we put it to print more cards and give it to the people

K: So you make your own and give it to someone to print for you?

Y: And print and give it to the people, many people they do by this way, they have very, very good writing, very nice ... that's what happened last Thursday, that's why I didn't come, we had a wedding, the card was just writing by one person, it was very nice

S: So, does everyone ask the same person?

Y: Sometime they do by hand but sometime they ask the same person, he writing very good

We have focused here just on Youssef because he provides a particularly interesting case study of 'code switching' in his literacy practices.

Youssef's choice of languages relative to his literacy practices seems to depend largely on the language of the recipients of his letters and also his cultural context (where, for example, it is common for one person with particularly good handwriting to assume a community card writing role). It also depends on his desire to promote particular literacies within his home domain (English, for example, with his children).

Literacies and competence

Another variable (and a self-evident one) likely to determine language choice is literacy competence; people are more likely to choose to read and write in languages they feel competent in using. For Youssef, in the everyday literacy domain, this appears not to be such an issue (though in the work domain it is different); he switches comfortably between Farsi and Pashto in most situations. Mei Ping, also, primarily reads and writes in Chinese due to her greater competence in that language. Her main use of English literacy is confined to the

occasional purchase of an English speaking newspaper, reading and writing stories for her young grandson, and the occasional letter to a Japanese friend. It is the same with Lily, who lives within a predominantly Chinese literacy environment and Mariam who lives within a Farsi literacy environment. But the issue of literacy competence is particularly crucial for both Maria and Nawal.

Maria and Nawal differ from the other students in their level of formal education. Youssef, for example, had received some tertiary education; Mei Ping had gone to university in China, and both Lily and Mariam had attended school for a reasonable number of years, but not so Maria and Nawal. Neither of them had received much schooling, Nawal in particular, and therefore they had not developed literacy skills in the Arabic script of their first language, Lebanese.

While Maria at least could claim she has some literacy skills in Arabic and had learnt a little French at school, Nawal missed out almost completely on a school education, as she explains:

S: What about in Lebanon, you went to school in Lebanon?

N: Just for short time, not for very long, just very short time ... don't remember much, but we lived somewhere on a farm, wasn't no school in the same village where we lived and then we moved a little bit after when I was nearly twelve and then, and then Dad sent me to school when I was twelve and then started school with the three years old and then I don't want to go to school any more and then I stopped

S: And how old were you when you stopped?

N: And probably I was twelve and then after I was dressmaker and helped my family

Nawal has been in Australia for over twenty years, but only in the past few years has she consciously attempted to develop some English literacy through attending adult literacy classes. Clearly, lack of first and second language literacy competence severely restricts her everyday literacy practices. As we describe later, Nawal has to rely heavily on others for support, but nevertheless she indicates she can now read notes her nine year old daughter brings home from school.

Maria has greater literacy competence in both Arabic and English than Nawal, but her writing in both scripts is very limited and thus her range of literacy practices. The interview indicated she rarely writes anything, and what she does write she usually copies from previous writing:

S: Do you have to do much writing?

M: No, I didn't, I don't do much writing ... If I sit for one hour to write concentrate I think I improve more but when I go home it's kids around me

K: But when you came it was really because you wanted to write out your cheques

M: Yeah, yeah ... I improve writing the cheque a little bit, but not as much as I want to

K: Maria, um, do you do Christmas cards and birthday cards in English?

M: Yeah, but it's a hassle for me ... I go find the older cards (inaudible) I get the old cards

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K: So you can copy?

M: Yeah, copy the words so not to spell wrong or something

S: For the children?

M: I was in Lebanon and I like to send you (Kay) card, I bought lot of cards, heaps of cards and I sat to write, and oh, I couldn't write them properly (inaudible)

Due to their lack of literacies, not surprisingly, for both Maria and Nawal, there is heavy reliance on switching to oral modes as a means of circumventing literacy events. Maria, for example, was asked if she sent cards to people in Lebanon now. She replied: 'From here, no, no, I ring them ... it's much easier the telephone and we use now the tape recorder ... I use it...' Nawal also relies on the telephone, but as she said, '... sometimes I telephone, but not everything I want to say ... '

Support networks

All the students in our study need support networks in their literacy practices. Fingeret (1993) in an American ethnographic study of non literate people was instrumental in indicating that some groups of people who lack literacy skills live their lives within social networks in which they are supported in their literacy practices. In our student group, Mei Ping, although university educated and multilingual, requires support; for example, when she is required to write a formal letter in English, she requests help from one of her daughters who attended university in Sydney.

Lily's support network is different from Mei Ping because Lily does not have the family support to draw on. Lily relies on her Chinese neighbour but also on official translating/interpreting services and a social worker service. She keeps cards with their telephone numbers with her at all times, in a special card case:

L: Oh, last year I did the Macquarie, the morning coach, the morning coach the lady give the card ... and that's handy card (shows cards in handbag)

K: Oh, I see you've got the interpreter service and the Department of Health

S: So if somebody couldn't understand you, you show them that do you, and that tells them where to ring?

L: For the doctor

S: And that's what it says on the other side, oh, I didn't know that, do you have to use that very often, do you have to show that?

L: Sometime I take my son go to see a doctor I have to take this one

S: Right

L: A few years ago my second son hit by a car then I have to phone for the solicitor and the third party and I have to get the translator but I have to pay the ninety dollar for one hour

S: Oh, for the interpreter ...

K: Because it was a compensation case

Unlike Lily, Youssef's support network is entirely informal. When he first arrived in the country eight years ago the relatives who sponsored him provided this literacy support network. Currently, he has support when he needs it from within the now quite large Afghani community in Sydney. He also gets help from a clerk where he works:

K: Youssef, the stuff that comes through your letterbox, for example, do you read that or do you just put it straight in the bin, the junk mail?

Y: No, I read it most of the time I read it how much I understand, but if I couldn't understand I leave it, but most of the time I try to read some of that and the letters, but most of the letters which come for me or my wife come from Council or voting or something I must read it, but if I can't understand important letters, I ask, uh, there is one very good person, he is clerk for our section and I take to him and he help me in this way, most of the time he help me

S: Is he an Afghani?

Y: He is from Yugoslavia but he has been for many thirty, thirty five years here ... he is a clerk ... he is a really good person not he help only me but he help everybody ... any forms most of the time when I take he knows ... he's got very big job in there everything he does but he help other people too ...

K: So letters from the Council or anything of that sort that comes through the letterbox that you don't know what to do

Y: Yes, yes if I don't understand I take to him

In the main, Youssef manages very well with an efficient network of support. In fact, his lack of writing skills in English rarely causes him too many difficulties. Even going to the doctor is unproblematic because he chooses to see a local Farsi speaking doctor. In fact, all the students choose doctors and solicitors with whom they speak a language other than English.

Dependency and the exercise of social power

For three of the students, Maria, Nawal and Mariam the issue is not so much one of establishing social networks of support in the local community, but rather living in a 'web of dependency' within the home due to their lack of literacy in English. These women depend on their husbands and their children in their literacy practices. Take the case of Mariam, who can in fact now read and write with some degree of competence in English:

S: Can you understand most letters?

M: Yes

S: So, you know if it's a bill or a letter from the Council?

M: Yes, and then I leave it for my husband

S: So that he can read it as well

K: If you have to write back, say it was a letter from the Council that you have to write an answer, who would do it?

M: My husband

S: That's because he's better at writing in English is it?

M: (unheard)

S: What about things to do with your children and school, you know, if they're sick and you have to write a letter to the teacher, do you write that or does your husband write that?

M: No, my husband

S: Does he?.. letters that come home from the school about school excursions or things like that, you can read that can you?

M: Yes, I can read that I manage everything

K: But you don't write the letter to the school ... why don't you?

M: (laughs)

S: (Steve addressing Kay) But, you know what Mariam's writing is like ... you're saying she could do it?

K: She could do it, yes

S: So it looks like that most of the reading in English you can cope with ok, but when it comes to writing something you tend to ask your husband?

M: Yes, yes

Nawal similarly defers to her husband, though unlike Mariam, she is unable to be independent with many literacy events in the everyday domain, be they in Arabic or English. For example, her family in Lebanon write to her regularly in Arabic, but she relies on her husband (and sometimes her daughter) to convey what is in these letters and to reply on her behalf. Maria's situation is different because her husband is deceased, but she, like Nawal and Mariam, is highly dependent on other family members. Whether intentional or not, these family members exercise enormous social power due in part to their superior literacy skills, power that in some cases can lead to ridicule and scapegoating. Both Maria and Nawal, for example, refer to other family members 'laughing at them' because of their lack of English. And Nawal once found herself in a situation where she felt she was to blame for the poor financial situation in their family. It was argued by her husband that they (Nawal and her husband) could not possibly go into a business together due to her lack of literacy, an attribution of blame she accepted without question:

K: And also, you said you want to go into business?

N: Yes, that is what I am thinking ... my spoken English that's fine, but if I want to write a few words, that is very difficult for me

S: What sort of business would that be?

N: Oh, some restaurant or something like that ... take away ... I was always asking to do business, but he said your writing no good, how are we going to do this, and I don't blame him because that's right

S: So that's the reason why you don't go into business?

N: Yes, that's right because I ask him before, let's do a little bit business ... and he said, what about your reading, you have to learn proper English and then you'll be able to do business, you can't do business like this ... it's very difficult

K: It's enough if he can do the reading and writing isn't it, and you can do the public relations work?

N: But I should know better ... you feel much better you know ... if someone ask me for order or something and I have to work it out too much ... it's not easy

These women have experienced domination in their homes, largely by their husbands, which could be due in some measure to their lack of literacies. They have many of the characteristics of powerlessness found in other 'politics of gender' studies of women in literacy classes (eg Bee, 1993; Horsman, 1990; Rockhill, 1993). To a large extent their identities are bound up with those of their husbands; in fact, they can be seen as a 'subsidiary' of their husbands (Rockhill & Tomic, 1994). As migrants they have generally followed their husbands to Australia and found themselves in a situation where their husbands have acquired the dominant language largely through their work while they have been left relatively isolated at home. Nawal, for example, explains how she had to cope without support when she first arrived in Australia at the age of twenty-one:

K: So who helped you Nawal, when you came here at twenty-one?

N: Oh my husband

K: He was the voice for you when you went shopping?

N: No, actually at the shop I managed, I don't know how ... I survived ... he doesn't do the shopping for me, I was only two weeks and I went to the city, I catch the train and I went to the city, my husband said to me don't you worry you lost or something, I said no, if I lost I have an address, I get into a taxi and say take me home ... I couldn't speak English, I say good morning or hello and that's it ... no, nothing ... I pick it up

S: So you never went to a course you just picked it up through speaking to people

N: Yes, yes

Children, language shifts and familial disjunctions

This section looks a little closer at some of the problems, or disjunctions, involving children and language shifts that may affect the literacy practices of this student group.

Issues relating to language maintenance and language shift among second and third generation migrant families in Australia are well documented (eg Clyne, 1991). There is also some recent research on tensions for parents in linguistically diverse families as their children learn English but in doing so risk losing fluency in their home language (Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 1994). However, traditionally, Chinese and Arabic speaking groups, the main ones represented in our student group, tend to have high levels of language maintenance (Clyne, 1991:55).

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All of our student group have children and some have grandchildren. In several cases there are 'disjunctions' within the family over maintenance of their first language and different literacies. Take the case of Lily's family: she and her husband speak Cantonese and are literate in Chinese, but not in English. Their children speak Cantonese and English, but are literate only in English:

S: It's easy for you to write in Chinese, that's no problem at all ... what about your children can they read and write in Chinese?

L: No, just talking, no reading and writing because here maybe homework in English

S: But that's a little bit difficult because if you had to leave a message for your children or son?

L: Oh that's ok I leave the message ok

S: In what, Chinese or in English?

L: In English, sometime I write wrong ... but they understand me

S: So when you write to your children you have to write in English?

L: Yes, they don't understand the Chinese so I have to write the English

S: But all around they've got Chinese newspapers and magazines so they can't read any of that?

L: No, no, they just look the picture

K: The eldest one, the twenty three year old, does he read any Australian newspapers?

L: Yes ... because they all born here

K: So you just look at the pictures in your son's ... ?

L: He read it, I just look at the picture

There are difficulties in Mariam's family also. Mariam's elder daughter, who is seventeen, speaks and writes Farsi but not as fluently as she would like (she arrived in Australia at the age of eleven). She is now diffident about visiting relatives in Iran because she feels she has lost her language. Mariam's younger thirteen year old daughter has even less command of Farsi, and this can cause literacy complications as Mariam indicates:

> One day I want to leave this note for my daughter, I went with another daughter, and I said, how I, what I do write, because I can't write English very well and my daughter can't read Farsi very well, and my eldest daughter said, Mummy, write the English, she can read the English ... I said, no, I can't write English very well (laughs) ... It's a real problem ...

Mariam's everyday literacy practices are a constant 'balancing act' between trying to encourage her daughters to learn Farsi, but at the same time trying to develop her own English language competence. She says she tries not to buy Farsi newspapers, and there are few Farsi books or magazines around the home, only English (notwithstanding one particular cooking book).

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The perceived value of literacy practices in English

Literacy practices in English are perceived differently from within this student group and this relates to their individual reasons for participating in a literacy program. Mei Ping, for example, explained that she wanted to improve her English literacy primarily to be able to assist her husband in his work as an antique furniture restorer. Within her everyday literacy practices she is comfortable operating primarily in her Chinese dialects. There is no suggestion that acquisition of English literacies should affect her other languages/dialects. In her family, her two daughters and her son are fluent in both Cantonese, Shanghainese and English and they are literate in both scripts. They and to some extent Mei Ping can switch codes comfortably, both orally and in writing according to their current situation.

Youssef, also, is comfortable using Pashto and Farsi in many of his everyday literacy practices, except that he, like Mei Ping, particularly wants to improve his English literacy within his work context. For him, also, acquisition of literacies in English does not conflict with Pashto or Farsi literacies, except that, as we have noted earlier (page 10), he does have concerns that his young children should learn English as 'their first language'.

There are, however, clearly some intrafamilial difficulties for other students. Lily, as we have indicated, has difficulty sharing some literacy events with her children because they do not share a common language literacy. For Lily, improved literacy competence in English would provide a useful functional role, meaning she would be less reliant on assistance from external agencies and neighbours and friends, but nevertheless her first language is maintained strongly in the family, and though her children are not literate in Chinese, their oral skills in Cantonese are strong.

The situation is different for Maria and Nawal. For them, there is a shift away from their Lebanese language, an apparent conscious rejection of Arabic and a shift to English. This is no doubt due partly to their lack of formal education in Arabic and their inability to use Arabic in their everyday literacy practices. In a sense, they have become disinherited from their Arabic background.

Because Maria lacks competence in both Arabic and English literacies, her writing is a mixture of both. At one stage in the interview she says she writes 'half Arabic half English', but this is not a written equivalent of the 'code mixing' that sociolinguists sometimes refer to in the spoken discourse of some multilingual groups (eg Wardhaugh, 1992:106), but a written linguistic duality:

S: What's your best language for writing in?

M: Arabic, I'm strong in Arabic (this is contestable, it doesn't fit with Kay's knowledge of Maria from the literacy class), but I'd like to if I could make it, I'd like to write very well in English and French but it's a bit too late for me, you know, I couldn't keep it here (laughs) but the grandchildren keep me busy home, you know, my life is different now I wish I could

S: Do you write in Arabic at home?

M: Yes, not every day, but maybe once you know my message

S: This is what, to your husband? (who Steve didn't realise at this stage was deceased)

M: No, no, (inaudible) this is shopping, shopping list or like I want to go here and there today tomorrow

S: Right, so all the messages you want to keep for yourself

M: Yes, yes but I try to write it now in English, doesn't matter if it doesn't, ah, spell good, you know, but I write sometimes in Arabic and then at the bottom English to keep me practice, you know, my daughter she laugh on me, she say what you doing Mum, I say if it's not right correct it for me ... sometimes I want to put message for us, someone ringing you or I'm going here and there, you know, she says, what kind of writing this?

Maria has always stated that the reason she participates in literacy classes is to be able to write cheques and keep some control over the family business following the death of her husband. But there would appear to be more to her motivation to learn English as we attempt to interpret the interesting narratives she provides of her early experiences in Lebanon. Maria explained that her father was American-born but was caught up in Lebanon during the war (second world war) and had always wanted to go back to America, but he was cheated out of doing so:

M: ... it interesting me when I was young, the English, because we have relative ... my father, he was born in America and he came during the big war to Lebanon just to visit his parents, not him, his father, my grandfather, and the big war started that time and no more to come back to America, so they stayed in Lebanon and he lost all his money and couldn't go back ... so my father when he wake up, really was a teenage boy, he said, I am not belong to here, I am belong to America, my blood is American (inaudible) and a friend of his he said, I take it to America give me your birth certificate, your birth certificate, he went and got it without telling his father his parents and that man he went on this paper, at that time they used to cheat and, you know, and er, and he start writing to him back to send him the detail and whatever he was supposed to do for (inaudible) and there was no answer, and when his father he knows what has happened he really got mad on him and that time my father he become hysterical, you know, he don't like Lebanon and he don't like ...

S: Because he got cheated?

Maria related, further, how an American relative of hers visited her village in Lebanon when she was sixteen and how it had a profound effect on her, causing her to immediately start to learn English:

> ... and one time one of his son, his cousin, came to Lebanon with the army and he had high position that time, that fellow, and he told the driver, I want to go to our village, our village, take me to there, and he took him there and my father he was in Beirut in the city and they sent him back to Beirut and he knocked on the door in nighttime, we didn't know, and really big shock for us when we saw person at the door who is relative to us who is from our blood and we didn't know him, we grab him like the Jesus Christ that time, and I liked that man, that time really I was sixteen and he was very nice, tall and handsome and he said look one day I'm going to take you to America and blah blah blah and from that time I start to learn English, because we couldn't communicate with him only very little Arabic

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In some way these narratives may explain Maria's wish to gain literacy competence in English; she has a part English speaking heritage and literacy competence in English represented for her, symbolically, a better life (America?), perhaps even romance (as seen through the eyes of a sixteen-year old).

At another point in the interview Maria was asked if English was as important to her as Arabic. She replied: 'Yes, very, very important, as I said, I like it very, very much and I wish I could, like a miracle, I could write it so easily ... ' Not surprisingly, most of the written material in her home is in English, not Arabic:

S: So, in your home then you have English magazines, do you have Arabic?

M: Yes, I have Arabic too, but I prefer English, I prefer things like that some friend of us when I was new here in this country they went and bought me Women's Weekly like recipes Lebanese written in English but the meaning it's Lebanese

K: Yes, you showed it to me

M: I loved that book, I used to read it over and over

K: It has Lebanese on one side

M: No, no Arabic, it's in English but say if it's tabouli, it says tabouli here and houmus and others

K: So you know what goes in, so then you looked for those words

Maria also chooses to read the Bible in English. This is interesting because Maria's reading in English, based on her literacy class work, indicates she would not be able to understand much of the Bible. It would seem, therefore, that her reading of the Bible in English may also be symbolic:

S: Do you read the Bible?

M: Yes, yes

S: And it's always in English, because that's quite hard to read, the language is very hard

M: Yes, yes

K: What part of the Bible do you like best?

M: Well, I open it really I don't really like I start from the beginning sometimes, I open it like this and read it, you know

K: To see if it's giving you a message?

M: Yeah, or I wish, you know, I could read from the beginning, read it one by one, but sometimes, I don't know, I couldn't really find the time and do that ... but sometimes I open the Bible and read the two pages, you know, I sit relax sometimes, I could not relax my body (inaudible)

We can draw some links here with Nawal, who also chooses to read the Bible and other Christian texts in English, but would have even more difficulty that Maria:

K: What about when you go to church, Nawal, do you have a Missal?

N: Yes, some words I have picked up ... I read a lot of words now in the Mass ... Our Father ...

K: So, do you read from your Missal at home or just on Sundays?

N: No, no, I read in the morning if I have time and sometimes before I go to bed ... I used to do it in Arabic in my mind, but now I am reading in the book I do it in English

We did not explore the issues further, but it would seem that Maria and Nawal might memorise particular Biblical texts in English and ascribe significance to them though they cannot in fact read these texts with word for word meaning. We draw some interesting, though obviously very qualified, parallels here to Baynham's (1995:28-29) observations of the rote learning and recitation of Qur'anic texts in Moroccan and other Islamic communities. Not being able to 'read' in the usual 'Western' sense of deriving word for word meaning is not necessarily a barrier to deriving spiritual significance from texts.

In other respects the situation is different for Nawal. Her language shift away from Lebanese seems to be associated with her distaste for what has happened in Lebanon over the years (civil war). Nawal speaks Lebanese at home because it is the language she is most familiar with, but if she had sufficient competence in English she would speak only English:

S: So, you really operate in two languages at home because with your husband you talk Arabic?

N: Sometimes we speak English it depends

K: So what would you speak at the dinner table?

N: We mix ... because the kids like it that way, you know, it's easier for the children I mean, they like to speak English, it's easier for them and for me, I don't mind ... I don't like much Arabic anyway ... because what happened to the Lebanese what happened to Lebanon, you know (inaudible) ... I don't hate anyone but I don't want my children to grow up Arabic

K: You don't want them to grow up in that scene

S: You're still most comfortable speaking Arabic aren't you, because it's your first language?

N: Yes, it's easy for me .. even sometime now my English is not very good but by myself I speak English even with Lebanese people, I don't know why ... but if I know English very well I am sure I wouldn't speak Arabic

For both Nawal and Maria there seems to be the belief that their future will be much better if they become literate in English, and English will then replace Arabic. It would appear, similar to women literacy students in other research studies, that they have a longing to be 'somebody' (see Rockhill, 1993:170), though we need to take care not to present an impoverished picture of these women. As we have already indicated, they may suffer forms of domination in their lives, but they point to many positive aspects also, including their relative material well being, and the success of their children at school and in their professional careers. Nevertheless, for them, literacy competence in English

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offers more and thus assumes great significance in their lives (it would be 'like a miracle' - Maria).

Pedagogical implications

It was never our intention to recommend or prescribe an adult literacy pedagogy appropriate for this particular group of students. Rather, our intention was to outline the complexity of the situation, to show how, at the individual student level, everyday literacy practices differ and intersect with a number of linguistic, cultural and situational variables, and thus their literacy needs in terms of a literacy program differ. The themes emerging from this research reinforce the concept of literacy as situated social practice, that for each student there are different circumstances and different literacy needs and on the basis of these differences we are in a better position to highlight aspects that should be accommodated when teaching a multilingual adult literacy class.

We consider that the diversity in literacy practices documented in this small study supports the usefulness for the adult literacy teacher of preliminary (and ongoing) dialogue with students over their literacy needs. As Barton (1994:217) reminds us, the starting point in teaching literacy to adults must always be the students' construction of their own literacy needs. We recognise that when students such as the ones we have interviewed seek assistance in an adult literacy class they often have specific literacies in mind (for example, Maria wanting to be able to write her own cheques). But equally often students come to us with the generally stated aim of simply wishing to improve their 'English'. There is always the dilemma for the teacher in determining what to teach to whom and how. We found that focusing discussion on the current literacy events and practices of each indvidual student gave us important insights in planning programs to meet their needs. Additionally, in the process of undertaking this research we developed increasing recognition of two broader aspects of pedagogy that need to be accounted for in the teaching of multilingual adult literacy classes.

Avoiding 'deficit' thinking by highlighting and valuing difference

As adult literacy teachers we are aware, through years of involvement in the adult literacy field, that it is easy for teachers to sometimes adopt a 'deficit' approach to adult literacy pedagogy: to focus just on what these students 'lack', that is, their lack of English literacies, and in some cases, a perceived lack of life skills generally. A deficit approach involves value judgements made by teachers who are often/usually monolingual, Australian or British born and well versed in 'schooled' literacy in English. We acknowledge that in referring to 'schooled' literacy we are drawing links to the autonomous model of literacy investigated by Street and Street (1991) and in doing so we are presenting a reductionist picture of English literacies taught in schools. There have been many developments in literacy teaching pedagogy in recent years and it could be argued that the schooled literacy/autonomous model of literacy is no longer valid. Nevertheless, our experiences indicate that many adult literacy teachers

are former primary school teachers whose early training and teaching was largely about imparting a standardised 'schooled' literacy with a heavy focus on teaching the 'conventions of the technology of text' in English that these students are considered to lack. To some extent this picture reflects the 'one culture/one language/one literacy' model of research referred to earlier in this paper (see Baynham, 1988). The different languages, literacies and cultures of these multilingual student groups often become 'invisible' to teachers in this model relative to the 'visibility' of dominant English literacies and dominant Eurocentric notions of Western culture (See Giroux, 1992, 1993).

This research describes some aspects of the 'other' lives of these students (that is, other than their deficiency in 'schooled' English literacy). It reveals a rich cultural and linguistic diversity in their everyday literacy practices in which a standardised English literacy often play a relatively minor role. Neither Mei Ping, Youssef, Lily or Mariam, for example, have any wish to replace the literacies of their primary and secondary discourses with a standardised English literacy. They may value the need to improve certain 'functional' literacy aspects that might improve their work performance or make life a little easier (being able to leave notes and take telephone messages in English, for example), but these need to be put into perspective in terms of how they conduct their lives generally. The situation with Maria and Nawal is a little different. Literacy in English is valued more highly, as we have explained, largely due to their poor educational opportunities as children and, in Maria's case, her affinity with the English language stemming possibly from her part English speaking cultural background.

Deficit thinking can be countered by drawing on the cultural and linguistic diversity of the group. Some recent research, for example, indicates the need for 'ethno-inclusive' practices in the adult literacy classroom (Davison et al, 1994). At a much broader, theoretical level, Giroux (1992, 1993) writes of the need for a 'pedagogy of difference' in which students (though his focus is primarily American schoolchildren) become 'border crossers', that is, they are encouraged to cross the cultural borders that constitute 'difference'. For Tollefson (1991:211) use of the mother tongue in educational sites (and work sites) 'is a fundamental human right'. Our interviews only scratched the surface of the rich source of material that could be utilised to ensure that the particular cultural and linguistic values of students in the group are recognised and made explicit. This applies to all of the group, not just those with a good repertoire of languages. Maria and Nawal, for example, though they lack literacy competence in their native Arabic, have diverse and interesting life experiences that can be highlighted in the adult literacy classroom. Additionally, a focus on literacies in other languages (perhaps with the assistance of a bilingual teacher or assistant) could assist the process of valuing different languages and cultures. Increasingly, bilingual education is being promoted as a means of enabling the voice of minorities to be heard in classrooms (Tollefson, 1995) and in particular in adult literacy classes for women students (Foster & Rado, 1991).

Addressing issues of power and dominance

The interviews revealed that lack of literacies in English (and other languages) has contributed to rendering some of the women in the group subject to dominance by other family members, in particular, by husbands. Interestingly, the only male in the class, Youssef, indicates his dominance within his family based on comments that his wife not only cannot speak English, but is not literate in Pashto either. Youssef would necessarily take a very dominant role in all literacy practices within the home domain.

The point is, should these issues of power and dominance be explicitly addressed in the adult literacy classroom. To do so may appear overtly political, but it could be argued that not to address these issues and instead to treat language and literacy as neutral or to see them not falling within the realms of adult literacy pedagogy, is equally political. For example, should a literacy student be left to feel that she is to blame for the family's financial woes because she is lead to believe she has insufficient English literacy skills to help run a restaurant business? Or should this issue and other issues of power and dominance, which can seen in terms of a 'critical literacy' (eg Bee, 1989, 1993; Lankshear, 1994; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993), become an explicit focus of pedagogy in the adult literacy classroom? It depends largely on what teachers see as their role in the adult literacy classroom and the approach to literacy that they take. If they take a sociocultural (ideological) approach to literacy as promoted in this paper, then there can be nothing neutral about the adult literacy classroom.

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